

Soundwatch Boater Education Program

It is estimated that over 500,000 people engage in marine wildlife viewing activities annually in the transboundary region of Washington State and Southern British Columbia, Canada. Whales are the primary targets for both commercial and recreational viewing, however, other marine wildlife such as seals and marine birds play an important role in the overall wildlife viewing experience. Southern Resident Killer Whales are the star viewing attraction and have experienced a population decline beginning in the mid 1990's. Concern over the decline incited the recent listing of this population as *Endangered* in the U.S. and in Washington State and as a *Species at Risk* in Canada. Potential threats are identified as prey availability, toxins, and vessel disturbance.

Listing status has prompted U.S. and Canadian federal and state agencies to develop recovery plans that include vessel management to minimize potential disturbance from vessels. The Soundwatch Boater Education Program is recognized by federal, state and local governments as successful in minimizing disturbance by reducing interactions between vessels and marine wildlife. Boater education and monitoring done by the Soundwatch Program has been identified as an essential component of both U.S. and Canadian Southern Resident Killer Whale recovery action-plans. In addition, the Soundwatch Program provides the baseline vessel trend data for virtually all of the regional vessel management efforts relative to Southern Resident Killer Whales. The U.S. NOAA Fisheries Service recommends the continuation and expansion of the Soundwatch Boater Education Program to minimize vessel disturbance to Southern Resident Killer Whales by providing education on viewing guidelines and regulations, monitoring commercial and recreational whale watch activities and reporting findings to regional managers and stakeholders for further adaptive management strategies.

Goal of the Project:

The goal of the Soundwatch Boater Education Program is to reduce vessel disturbance to killer whales and other marine wildlife in the Haro Strait region of Washington State and British Columbia, Canada.

Project Objectives and Activities to Accomplish Them:

Soundwatch Boater Education Program Objectives and Activities:

Objective: Educate boaters on the guidelines and regulations for vessel operation around marine wildlife and wildlife habitat before they leave the shore.

Key Activities:

- 1-Work with regional governmental and non-governmental (ngo) partners to distribute current guidelines and regulations for vessel operation around marine wildlife and wildlife habitat to boater groups, at boating facilities, boating businesses, marine parks, boat shows, fairs and festivals.
- 2- Work with regional governmental and ngo partners to promote and distribute current guidelines and regulations for vessel operation around marine wildlife and wildlife habitat through existing programs such as vessel registration and licensing programs, fishing licenses and rule book publications, boater safety programs, law enforcement outreach efforts, agency and organizational email list serves, website postings and marine stewardship programs.
- 3- Promote current guidelines and regulations for vessel operation around marine wildlife and wildlife habitat through Soundwatch stewardship presentations and trainings to boater groups, naturalists, commercial tour operators, guides, and citizen stewardship groups.

Objective: Reinforce the learning experience in the actual context where marine wildlife and wildlife habitat disturbance takes place.

Key Activities:

- 1- Conduct on-the-water vessel patrols during the peak summer months (May-September) to intercept recreational boaters and paddlers before marine wildlife and wildlife habitat disturbances occur, give them guideline and law informational packets, and to interpret the wildlife and boating situation that they are encountering.

2- Conduct on-the-water vessel patrols (May-September) to assist the commercial marine wildlife viewing industry with vessel and paddling conduct around marine wildlife and wildlife habitat that is consistent with guidelines and laws through vhf radio and cell phone communications.

3- Conduct on-the-water vessel patrols (May-September) to promote and encourage better boater behavior around marine wildlife and wildlife habitat through the presence of the Soundwatch patrol vessel.

4-Conduct on-the-water vessel patrols (May-September) to record and report irresponsible boater behavior around protected wildlife and wildlife habitat to appropriate marine wildlife management authorities.

Objective: Provide a scientific platform to monitor vessel activities.

Key Activities:

1-Conduct on-the-water vessel patrols to monitor whale and vessel activities near marine wildlife and Marine Protection Areas (MPA's).

2-Collect whale and vessel activity data using trained citizen science volunteers using rigorous data collection protocols. Data collection consists of 1) counts of vessels near wildlife by type, location and activity; 2) wildlife/whale identification, location, travel direction and selected standardized behavioral observations; 3) vessel contact information; 4) commercial and private vessel compliance with guidelines and regulations; and 5) vessel behaviors in designated MPA's.

Objective: Encourage better compliance of the commercial wildlife viewing industry with current guidelines and regulations for vessel operation around marine wildlife.

Key Activities:

1-Utilize Soundwatch monitoring data to generate weekly feedback reports and annual summary reports to the wildlife viewing industry on Soundwatch observations of vessel operators and paddlers behaving contrary to current guidelines and regulations for vessel operation around marine wildlife.

Objective: Utilize Soundwatch data to characterize vessel activity trends to evaluate, adjust and develop new guidelines and/or regulations for vessel operation around marine wildlife.

Key Activities:

1-Compile and analyze annual and long-term data on vessel activity trends with whales and marine protection areas.

2- Generate and distribute annual vessel activity trend data reports to regional governmental management and enforcement agencies, the wildlife viewing industry, regional marine environmental organizations and stakeholders.

3- Present annual findings to regional governmental management and enforcement agencies along with Canadian partners at annual monitoring program meetings to evaluate the need and/or to provide recommendations for adjustments to existing guidelines and/or the creation of new regulations specific to vessel operation around whales.

4- Work with regional governmental management and enforcement agencies and monitoring partners to develop and produce new guideline and regulation educational materials to promote and distribute.

Objective: Apply an annual adaptive management process.

Key Activities:

1- Participate in an annual cycle of guideline and regulation development, distribution and evaluation.

Evaluation Plan

The Soundwatch program evaluates outcomes of each year's objectives by comparing measurable activity efforts with previous years. Quantitative measurements are evaluated in terms of the number of boaters educated, numbers of guideline/regulation materials distributed, number and types of guideline promotions accomplished through partnerships, number of stewardship and training presentations given, number of vessel patrol days, number of boaters contacted on-the-water, number of monitoring hours with whales and vessels, number of feedback reports generated, the creation of end of year activity and vessel reports, number of stakeholder and management meetings and workshops attended.

Qualitative evaluation of programmatic objectives such as people changing their boating behaviors around marine wildlife as a result of receiving guideline or law educational materials, attending a presentation, being contacted by a Soundwatch patrol vessel or seeing a Soundwatch patrol vessel on scene near whales is hard

to measure accurately. Surveys or interviews with boaters are impractical to conduct during short on-the water contacts, and the turn over with new boaters is high. The primary way Soundwatch is able to measure the impact the program is having on reducing disturbances to marine wildlife is through evaluating the annual vessel activity and compliance trends with the current guidelines and regulations, and how successful this information was in creating adjustments to guidelines and/or the creation of new regulations to better protect the whales from irresponsible boater behavior.

The Soundwatch program annually evaluates the objective of employing an overall adaptive management framework through participating in an annual cycle of guideline and regulation development, distribution and evaluation. Distribution of guidelines and regulations takes place through shore based outreach efforts and on-the-water patrols. Evaluation of the guidelines and regulations occurs through on-the-water monitoring and data collection as well as the compilation of data and subsequent creation of end of year reports that are shared with marine managers. Development of new guidelines is initiated through the collaboration with managers and stakeholders to address new trends. These new guidelines are then promoted through regional distribution. The creation of new regulations follows county, state and federal processes and takes considerable more time and effort to establish.

Soundwatch Program Annual Implementation:

Phase I Distribution and Outreach (April –May)

Phase II On-the Water Patrols (May-September)

Phase III Evaluation and Development (October –March)

Phase I Distribution and Outreach (April –May)

1. Production and distribution of Annual Soundwatch Data Report(s).
2. Attendance to stakeholder meetings, conferences, public hearings, workshops.
3. Distribution of new educational materials.
4. Education/Outreach on marine stewardship.
5. Vessel preparation for season.
6. Training of vessel operators.
7. Volunteer/Intern training.

Phase II On-the Water Patrols (May-September)

1. Reduction of potential whale disturbances through the on-the-water presence of the Soundwatch educational patrol boat.
2. Distribution of education materials on- the-water, and general outreach.
3. Data collection on marine wildlife viewing trends, compliance measurement.
4. Coordination of operations with regional enforcement and monitoring partners.
5. Respond to media and public inquiry.
6. Generate Feed Back Reports to commercial operators.
7. Generate project report of Soundwatch Annual Activities.

Phase III Evaluation and Development (October –April)

1. Vessel maintenance and repair, prepare for winter storage.
2. Data entry and analysis.
3. Preparation of reports, publications and presentations.
4. Attendance to stakeholder meetings, conferences, symposia.
5. Recommendation of adaptive adjustments to current guidelines or for new regulations as indicated by new scientific findings and shifts in whale and vessel behaviors.
6. Adjusted outreach education materials development and production.
7. End of year accounting, future planning, budgeting, fund-raising.

Past Work:

Creation of Trans-boundary Be Whale Wise Marine Wildlife Guidelines.

In 2002, the Soundwatch program instigated the development of a trans-boundary set of recognized best practices for marine wildlife viewing known as Be Whale Wise. Be Whale Wise is now the standardized set of marine wildlife guidelines used throughout Washington State and British Columbia, Canada. In 2006 the Be Whale Wise Guidelines were thoroughly revised and have since been annually reprinted. Revisions to the Be Whale Wise guidelines are made through a stakeholder inclusive, adaptive management process. Changes reflect trends in boating practices observed through Soundwatch and partner programs monitoring efforts as

well as regional best available science on vessel effects to marine mammals. In addition to the core Be Whale Wise partners: NOAA Fisheries; Fisheries and Oceans Canada; Soundwatch and Straitwatch, the current guidelines are endorsed by over 12 public agencies and non-governmental organizations in the U.S. and Canada.

San Juan County Orca Ordinance Enacted in September 2007

Soundwatch provided Soundwatch Annual Data Reports and made presentations to the San Juan County Council urging them to consider enacting a county ordinance to protect Southern Resident Killer Whales from irresponsible boaters. Using the endangered species listing as the mechanism and the Be Whale Wise Guidelines as the model, the council and prosecuting attorney created a county law that went into effect in September of 2007. This is one of the few times when a state or a county has been able to enact a marine mammal protection law that is more restrictive than a governmental regulation. The first county citation was given to a recreational boater motoring within 100 yards of a whale in late September 2007.

Washington State Vessel Regulations for Killer Whales Effective June 2008.

Using San Juan County's new vessel ordinance as the instigator and the model, duplicate House and Senate Orca Protection Bills were introduced in the Washington State 2008 Legislative Session. Both bills had over a dozen sponsors and received unanimous bi-partisan support as well as strong public support including the commercial whale watch industry and recreational boating community. Washington Governor, Chris Gregoire, signed the bill in March 2008 and it went into effect June 2008. Soundwatch staff provided verbal and written testimony as well as provided Soundwatch Annual Data Reports that were used as the basis establishing the need for vessel regulations as well as providing recommendations for specific regulatory statute language. Soundwatch worked with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to develop and produce vessel regulation brochures and posters and assisted with training programs highlighting the new vessel law as well as coordinating on-the-water schedules with state and local enforcement agencies. Two citations were given to commercial whale watch operators in 2008.

Collaboration:

The Soundwatch program's success is built on its strong and enduring collaborations. Partnerships include U.S. and Canadian federal, state, provincial and local governmental agencies, the Straitwatch-South Monitoring Program, several regional non-governmental organizations, the whale research community, and the broad recreational boating and fishing community. Soundwatch also works closely with members of the Pacific Whale Watch Association (formerly known as the Whale Watch Operators Association Northwest). Academic institutions affiliated with the program include the University of Washington, School of Marine Affairs and the Friday Harbor Laboratories; Colorado College; Ripon College; the University of California Davis; the Washington State University Beach Watcher Program and the Beam Reach Marine Science and Sustainability School.

Key Entities:

Key partnerships include NOAA Fisheries; Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada; Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and San Juan County. NOAA Fisheries provides financial support to the program and is a partner in the promotion of the Be Whale Wise Marine Wildlife Guidelines. Fisheries and Oceans Canada has replicated the Soundwatch program model in two other coastal communities: Straitwatch out of Johnstone Strait, British Columbia, and the newly developed Straitwatch South of Victoria, British Columbia. All of the programs utilize the same protocols for program implementation and data collection and provide standardized vessel activity data and end of year data reports to NOAA Fisheries; Fisheries and Oceans Canada and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Soundwatch works closely with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Enforcement, Endangered Wildlife and Watchable Wildlife programs and receives funding from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife ALEA fund to support the citizen science and outreach education efforts of program volunteers.

Soundwatch works closely with the San Juan County Council and the Marine Resources Committee and works under an annual contract to help implement the San Juan County Marine Stewardship Area Plan by providing boater education and outreach as well as collecting data within marine protection areas within the stewardship area.

Straitwatch South and Soundwatch function as trans-boundary counterparts in the Haro Strait/Victoria area working together to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of both on-the-water education and monitoring program.

Impact:

Through the continuation of program efforts in 2009 Soundwatch expects to see:

- 1- Prevention of potential wildlife disturbances caused by boaters;
- 2- Increased public awareness and support of the Be Whale Wise Marine Wildlife Guidelines for Boaters, Paddlers and Viewers; the Washington State Vessel Law for Whales; the San Juan Island National Wildlife Refuge System; and the San Juan County Marine Stewardship Area;
- 3- Decreased Soundwatch observations of commercial and recreational boaters and paddlers within 100-yards of whales and parking in the path of whales;
- 4- Long-term database characterizing vessel trends near marine wildlife maintained and added to;
- 5- Updated Vessel Activity Data Report;
- 6- Vessel regulations adopted for killer whale protection at the US and Canadian federal level.

In the long term, more community involvement concerning best practices for boaters around marine wildlife is expected as the region becomes more developed and recreational and commercial use of the waterways continues to grow. Public support for more protective measures and more recreational and commercial vessel activity restrictions is likely to draw large public participation in future wildlife viewing management decision making processes. Soundwatch expects that by assisting with education and monitoring as well as providing long-term data on vessel activities near marine wildlife and their habitats that residents, visitors and commercial operators can better work collaboratively with management authorities to develop reasonable marine conservation and wildlife viewing management strategies, including vessel regulations that allow for wildlife protection and appropriate sustainable public and commercial use.

Committed and/or Proposed Sources of Funding for the Project:

- Source: NOAA Fisheries NW Regional Office of Protected Resources
Amount: \$30,000
Status: Annual Soundwatch Contract, waiting for budget approval
- Source: NOAA Fisheries NW Fisheries Science Center
Amount: \$10,000
Status: Annual Soundwatch Contract, waiting for budget approval
- Source: Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife A.L.E.A. Grant Funds
Amount: \$10,000
Status: Bi-Annual Application (Granted)
- Source: San Juan County Marine Resources Committee
Amount: \$2,500
Status: Annual Soundwatch Contract
- Source: Foundation Grants
Amount: \$30,000
Status: Annual Application (Applied)
- Source: Individual and Business Contributions
Amount: \$10,000
Status: Annual Average Donation
- Source In-Kind Donations and Labor
Amount: \$30,000
Status: Annual Average Donation